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SIPDIS

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THE WHITE HOUSE PASS TO NSC

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SUBJECT: STUDY IN THE U.S. -- IT'S GOOD FOR YEMEN -- IT'S
GOOD FOR THE U.S. -- BUT THE NUMBERS ARE WOEFULLY SMALL

[1](#)1. SUMMARY: As was the case throughout the MENA region, the number of Yemeni students applying to study in the United States plummeted after 9/11. The good news is that the trend line is positive -- our numbers are slowly climbing after bottoming out in 2003. The bad news is that even with a more than fifty percent increase in F1 visas since then, the total number for 2005 will end up well below half that of 1999. An examination of the visa numbers shows, moreover, that to the extent overall numbers are climbing, it is largely a reflection of considerably higher exchange program numbers (J1 visas) and is only marginally related to increased F1 students. To the extent that continued increase in the numbers is possible, it will require a sustained and enhanced commitment to the array of exchange programs for which Yemenis are eligible and eagerly participate. Over the long term, sending more Yemenis to the United States on the USG nickel is the best investment we can make in the future of this country and our bilateral relations with it. We need to dramatically increase funding for full four-year undergraduate study and post-graduate exchanges.

A Slow Recovery in Yemeni Student Numbers

[1](#)2. Table 1 (following) provides the number of issuances for each type of student visa by year since 1999 (January 1 to December 31):

TABLE 1: STUDENT VISAS BY TYPE

YEAR	--	F1	--	J1	--	M1	--	TOTAL
1999	--	199	--	41	--	5	--	245
2000	--	168	--	38	--	2	--	208
2001	--	116	--	45	--	0	--	161
2002	--	69	--	73	--	0	--	142
2003	--	47	--	72	--	0	--	119
2004	--	62	--	110	--	0	--	172
2005*	--	70	--	105	--	2	--	177

*2005 numbers are as of December 6.

[1](#)3. The number of issued F1 visas shows a dramatic decline after 9/11, bottoming out in 2003 at only 24% of the 1999 numbers. Although post has seen F1 visa issuances rise from 47 in 2003 to 70 as of YTD 2005, the final tally for 2005 will be far lower than even half of the 1999 high. To the extent that the total number of student visas issued has recovered at all from 9/11, it is through J1 visas, which have risen over 250% between 1999 and the present. The burst in J1 visas is largely attributable to the birth of several new exchange programs, including the PLUS and YES programs as well as MEPI's Summer Institutes.

Reasons for the Decline and Prospects for the Future

[1](#)4. Anecdotal evidence from Yemenis suggests several reasons for the decline -- and for the failure of post to bring numbers back up past the existing plateau. The primary reason is that Yemenis, like many Arabs and Muslims today, are very anxious about traveling to the United States. In YES and PLUS interviews, and in briefing sessions with departing International Visitors, candidates' apprehension often is palpable. Horror stories about lengthy interrogations at airports and about harassment of Muslims and Arabs, whether or not true, abound and move swiftly through the current of Yemeni society.

[1](#)5. Several other reasons account for the continuing low numbers. Post has experienced several disruptive closures in the past three years as well as an occasional reduction in NIV staffing, undoubtedly hampering post's NIV processing capacity. Education in the United States is expensive, moreover, and with the rise of American universities in the Gulf (particularly in the UAE and Kuwait), many Yemenis find that they can have their cake and eat it too -- obtain a prestigious degree without having to travel to the United States. Moreover, regardless of whether the odds of

obtaining a visa are lower in the post-9/11 world (they are not, for qualified candidates), the process is perceived as more drawn-out and complex. This perception, moreover, largely accords with reality - additional, post-9/11 clearances can take weeks to complete.

16. The available low-cost university education in countries such as Malaysia, Indonesia, and India has become increasingly attractive for Yemenis exploring their higher education options. This is true both for self-funded individuals and for the direction of scholarship money from the ROYG. Dr. Ali Al-Shour, Deputy Minister of Higher Education, candidly acknowledged that the ROYG will increasingly direct its scholarship funds toward South and East Asia, given the low cost. One departing International Visitor noted that the association of Yemeni students in India is over four hundred strong.

17. Notwithstanding the previous, the prestige of an American university degree remains unparalleled. Post has seen robust application figures for the Fulbright Master's Degree program (80 applicants in the most recent cycle), and American university graduates generally have their pick of professional options upon their return. A very abridged list of senior Yemeni officials with American academic training (all of whom, moreover, are considered among the more favorably-inclined toward the United States) includes former Prime Minister and current head of the Shura Council Abdulaziz Abdulghani, former Prime Minister and current head of the ruling GPC Party and advisor to President Saleh Abdulkarim Al-Iryani, Minister of Information Hussein Al-Awadi, Minister of Human Rights Amat Al-Alim Al-Soswa, Vice President of Sana'a University Ahmed Al-Kibsi, and Yemen Observer Publisher and Deputy Press Secretary to the President Faris Al-Sanabani. All of these individuals regularly cite their American academic training as part of the basis for their eventual leadership positions, and in many cases are the most vocal proponents themselves of United States university experience for Yemenis. Al-Kibsi, for example, serves on the board of the Fulbright alumni association and regularly and eagerly participates in the Fulbright interview process.

18. At present, most Yemenis studying at American universities are self-funded, and therefore represent an elite stratum of society. A handful of ROYG scholarship students continue to travel to the United States for university education, mostly the children of high-ranking officials with close contacts to the Presidency. [Note: Independent weekly Al-Wasat published an expose on August 11 on the use of Ministry of Oil scholarships to support the education in the United States and elsewhere of the children of high government officials. Immediately after publication of this report, Al-Wasat editor-in-chief Jamal Amer was abducted, threatened, and assaulted. End note.] And, of course, the creation of new exchange programs has allowed post partially to make up the difference in numbers. The YES and PLUS programs, as well as the previously-existing International Visitor program and Fulbright and Humphrey fellowships, now account for a far higher proportion of total student visas than before.

Conclusions

19. Post cannot overstate the value of Yemeni students studying in the United States. Students and exchange program participants return not only with increased skills, but also with a visibly changed impression of the United States. Responses from several recently returned International Visitors support this conclusion. Member of Parliament Shawqi Shamsan, who participated in a summer 2005 IV program, returned to Yemen energized and full of ideas about improving critical thinking skills in Yemeni schools. Nabil Al-Sofi, a prominent Islah-affiliated journalist and editor-in-chief of NewsYemen.Net, returned from his IV program and promptly published several articles praising the legal regime and framework of the United States. And Heba Hassan, a Taiz University student leader and intern with the Human Rights Information and Training Center, singled out in particular a visit to a synagogue during her fall 2005 IV program as an experience that helped her appreciate the religious diversity of the United States. Post places strongly emphasizes American academic exchange in its public diplomacy programming, and works together with the EducationUSA centers in Yemen to promote student exchange. However, the factors pulling Yemenis away from study in the United States are difficult to overcome. Post strongly recommends an increase in exchange program funding so that this critical pipeline for mutual understanding can be widened.

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